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WITHDRAWALS

FROM THE

CIVIL SERVICE.

REPORT OF A SPECIAL COMMITTEE

OF THE

National Civil Service Reform League

1907

Withdrawals from the Civil Service.

REPORT OF A SPECIAL COMMITTEE OF THE NATIONAL CIVIL SERVICE REFORM LEAGUE.

Although the resolution under which your committee was appointed constituted it, in general terms, a committee on withdrawals from the civil service, your committee has thought it more profitable, in view of the memoranda which led to its creation, to confine their attention to certain special aspects of the subject intrusted to their charge. They have accordingly kept before them, as the object of their inquiry, the difficulty in obtaining employees from the eligible lists of the Civil Service Commission, and the corresponding difficulty in retaining the best of them so appointed. In endeavoring to find a method of treatment they have imposed a further limitation upon themselves. Since it is probably true that the same reasons which render selections difficult also render retention difficult, we have thought it expedient to approach the question from the point of view of appointments rather than withdrawal. Statistics as to withdrawals, being indiscriminately mingled with the statistics as to other separations, do not readily lend themselves to the study of the particular problem in hand. The statistics as to selections and refusals, however, show plainly the reluctance with which positions in the civil service are accepted.

Through the courtesy of Mr. John T. Doyle, the efficient Secretary of the Civil Service Commission, we have been able to obtain two exceedingly valuable tables:

1. A table showing generally the percentage of declinations in all the Departments at Washington.

2. A more detailed table, showing by grade of salary and character of employment the selections and declinations, in both the departmental and field service, in two

typical departments, that is to say, the Interior Department and the Navy Department.

From this table we find at the outset that the percentage of declinations for all departments, during the fiscal year ended June 30, 1906, was 28.96%. This is slightly more than the percentage of withdrawals, 25%. The percentage of declinations for places below $900 is 30.23%; of those of $900 and over it is 26.51%. When the figures, however, are considered by departments they seem to be more significant, for we find that the percentage of declinations run from nothing in the Department of State, where there were but two certifications during the year, to 53.57% in the Smithsonian Institution. For the purpose of making deductions likely to have validity for the whole service these extreme cases should be excluded, the high percentage of declinations in the Smithsonian Institution, for example, being due to the fact that most of those selected were scientific men engaged in teaching under contract and so unable to report in season. Certain special local circumstances require the elimination also of the Interstate Commerce Commission. Special cases being eliminated, we find that the percentage of declinations ranges from 17.22% in the Treasury to 49.63% in the War Department.

Next to the War Department comes the Navy Department with a percentage of 48.65%. The Interior Department, with 31.67%, lies midway between the Navy Department and the lowest of all the great departments, the Agricultural, with 22.88%. Anything but the most general conclusions, however, based upon these general averages for all salaries and all classes of work, would likely to be misleading. If we proceed then to compare the declinations of places below $900, with the declinations of that grade and above, the figures become somewhat more instructive. In the Treasury Department, which is one of the largest, having a total of 604 tenders as against 148 in the Navy, we find that below $900 the percentage is 18.57%, and above $900 12.77%. In the Navy Department, on the other hand, with its much

smaller number of tenders, the percentage of declinations below $900 is 55.56%; at $900 and over, 22.58%. This apparent preference of the Treasury Department is significant and should be borne in mind, as it will be dealt with later.

In comparing the Interior and Navy Departments' service at Washington, we find again that although the percentage of declinations of places at $900 and over is approximately the same in both departments, 22.30% in the Interior and 22.58% in the Navy, yet in the places below $900 the percentage in the Interior Department is but 33.15%, as against 55.56% in the Navy. There would seem to be some reason, therefore, which makes against appointments in the Navy Department, especially to the lower grades. The distaste felt for the service of the Navy Department seems to be shared with respect to the War Department as well. There, however, we find that the percentage of declinations in two places of $900 and over is slightly more (50.63%) than declinations to the grades below, namely, 48.21%. The deductions to be gathered from the tables of all departments, however, indicate that this is the result of certain special conditions and does not show a preference for the smaller salary. In both instances the percentage for the War Department is one of the highest, and indicates an undoubted reluctance to enter that service.

Let us now turn to the detailed comparison between the two departments selected as types, the Navy and the Interior.

This table shows the selections and declinations respectively from the (1) stenographer and typewriter, (2) clerk, and (3) bookkeeper registers, for the year ending June 30, 1906. These selections and declinations are broadly divided between the apportioned service and the field service, and are reclassified again by the amount of the salary paid for the positions sought to be filled. Including the field service (in addition to the Departmental Service dealt with in the first table) the Interior Department, with the exception of the War Department, received

the next largest number of certifications to the Navy Department. As it differs from the Navy Department more distinctly in the conditions of its service, it has been taken as a preferable comparison.

STENOGRAPHER AND TYPEWRITER REGISTER.

Taking first the stenographer and typewriter register, we find that out of 126 tenders in the Interior Department 52, or two-fifths, were declined. Out of 323 tenders in the Navy Department 179, or more than one-half, were declined.

CLERK REGISTER.

From the clerk register, out of 19 tenders in the Interior Department 10 were declined. In the Navy Department, out of 200 tenders 120, or three-fifths, were declined.

BOOKKEEPER REGISTER.

Coming next to the bookkeeper register, it appears that out of 12 tenders in the Interior Department but 2 were declined, while out of 47 tenders in the Navy Department 22, or 46.81% were declined.

The total number of tenders made from the three registers during this period were: Interior, 157; declined, 64, or 40.07%; Navy Department, 570; declined, 321, or 56.31%.

Thus we find the general conclusions based on table No. 1, confined to the departmental service, supported as well by table No. 2, embracing the field service also. Not only is the comparison between the Interior and Navy Departments generally in favor of the former, but there is no class, either in the departmental or field service, whether stenographer and typewriter, clerk, or the bookkeeper, in which the preference is reversed.

In most grades the cases are hardly sufficiently numerous to show the direct effect of the relative salary offered. To this, however, there are several exceptions.

In the $840 per annum class of the apportioned service the Navy Department made 31 tenders, of which 14, or

45.16%, were declined. In the class immediately above $900 the Navy Department made 12 tenders, of which but 2, or 15.39%, were declined.

Taking the bookkeeper class we find that the percentage of declinations is 46.81% in the Navy Department, as against 16.67% in the Interior Department. Is this diversity to be ascribed to the relative range of salary? In the first place it should be noted, as possibly effecting the result, that the total number of certifications in the Interior Department was but 12, against 47 in the Navy Department. Out of those in the Interior Department 3 certifications were for places within the apportioned service. The only one refused was an appointment at $480 per year. In the Navy Department none of these places were in the apportioned service.

Of the 9 bookkeeper places in the field service of the Interior Department, 5 were at the salary of $1,200 per annum and every one was accepted; of the remaining 4, one was accepted at $720, one at $939, and one at $1,020 per annum, and one declined at $1,000 per annum. Comparing this with the Navy Department we find that out of 47 certifications, all for the field service, 35 were at a salary of $2.48 per diem, or equivalent to $776 per year, and of these nearly 16, or more than 45%, were declined. The inference, however, that these declinations were due largely to the relatively lower salary of the places offered in the Navy Department would seem to be offset to a degree by the fact that for two selections of bookkeeper at $4 per diem, or $1,252 per year, there were also two declinations at the same salary, but when the whole number of places is considered the conclusion is irresistible that the relatively high percentage of declinations in the bookkeeper service of the Navy Department as compared with that of the Interior Department (46.81% against 16.87%) is due to the lower range of salary.

In order to approach the subject from another point of view, an examination was made of the reasons for 100 declinations by eligibles on the stenographer and typewriter register, 50 of whom have since been appointed to

other positions and 50 of whom are still eligible. The following results were obtained:

23% declined because of unsatisfactory location.

16% declined because of sickness, either of the eligible, or some member of his family.

15% declined on account of business arrangements which precluded acceptance.

14% because of miscellaneous reasons, chiefly because Sunday work was necessary in the particular service in question, or because of inability to pay transportation.

It should be borne in mind also that the Civil Service Commission does not certify an eligible for a position at a salary which he has indicated he would not accept, or in a locality which is not satisfactory to him.

When a declination is made upon either of these accounts, the name is not again certified until salary and location limitations are fixed. If he declines because of sickness, business arrangements and the like, his name is not again certified until a statement is received that the obstacles will not stand in the way of the next tender.

Notwithstanding the safeguards of this character the fact remains that the method of appointment does not operate in that easy automatic way which the framers of the system would seem to have anticipated.

In the first place it is plain that throughout the whole service the percentage of refusals to accept appointment is remarkably high. When we remember that certifications are always taken, subject to apportionment, from those standing highest on the registers, we cannot fail to perceive that this high rate of declinations inevitably tends to the selection of an inferior personnel, at least as gauged by an examination standard. The persons certified as having received the highest marks decline, one after another, until somebody is at length reached who

will take the appointment. The result of the increasing proportion of declinations is that appointments are now largely made from those having examination grades below 80%, whereas formerly the persons appointed were, for the most part, graded above that figure. This tendency is doubtless offset to some degree by holding frequent examinations, by which new material of the higher grade is frequently added to the registers depleted through appointments or declinations. But the process of declination commences again with the new registers and moves steadily on.

Another obvious consequence of the high rate of declinations is the crippling of the service resulting from the time and effort lost in making appointments in face of successive refusals to accept. Even in case of acceptance by the first eligible, there is always an interval of time consumed in correspondence, for under the system of apportionment the person first certified as having the highest mark may probably reside 3,000 miles from the place of appointment.

In such a case as this a temporary appointment must generally be made. But when the delay is stretched over a period sufficient to enable correspondence to be commenced with a number of persons who successively decline, a temporary appointment becomes an absolute necessity, and if we again multiply the delay by the number of places to be filled in the course of a year in a large department, we discover an obvious opportunity for the creation of what might be called a "permanent" temporary roll, the temporary employee passing, with a few days' intermission, from one vacant desk to another.

Another evil resulting from the present system is the inequality between the various departments. Distaste for the service of one department rather than another must inevitably work out in one or two ways: Either the class of employees obtained by a department so discriminated against must be inferior in grade or the department must be content to retain its employees only for a limited period. Either case makes against the efficiency.

The best men either will not accept the low salary at which entrance into the service is had, or, having once entered and finding little chance of increase, pass out steadily to more remunerative fields of appointment. To such an extent is this true that a head of one of the bureaus of a great department, having an extensive field service, has complained that the material sent him by the Civil Service Commission was too good. His bureau was constantly badgered by requests from officers in the field for increases for this man or that, because he could not otherwise be kept. It seemed to this official that the administration would be assisted rather by a permanent force of mediocre quality than by a changing, shifting one of superior quality.

Your committee has not been able to escape the conviction that the discrimination shown against certain departments by the high percentage of declinations is the result of two factors which are themselves but different aspects of the same administrative policy, namely, no pay in the entrance grade and but little prospect of advancement.

If your committee are asked to lay bare the causes of this falling off in the service and suggest appropriate remedies, they must confess themselves somewhat at a loss. The subject is complicated by a great many administrative details. The character of work done by various departments is infinitely various and requires capacities of many sorts. It is also performed under conditions of dissimilarity as to locality and the like.

Even in the same grade of salary, we find in one department that the clerk must be familiar with numerous laws and regulations, orders and decisions, able to weigh evidence, and determine questions of law and fact, or perhaps to state accounts from original data and compile statements and details of official actions and the reasons therefor, while in another bureau of the same department a clerk at the same salary will be doing work requiring little more than ordinary clerical capacity and habits.

Certain broad facts, however, disentangle themselves

from the confusion of the subject. These facts in the opinion of your committee indicate certain remedies, some of which are limited in their scope and hardly require legislative action; others go to the root of the whole system of classification and promotion.

Before touching upon the broader and more thoroughgoing remedies, your committee wish to make minor suggestions which would eliminate some of the difficulties to which attention has been drawn.

We have observed, for example, that there is an extremely high percentage of declinations in the field service of the Navy Department. There can be little doubt that one of the causes of this disproportionate rate is the circumstance that under the nomenclature employed by that department the incumbents of field clerical positions are designated as "special laborers" and the compensation is on a *per diem* basis. It is the practice of the Department to make the tender of appointment by telegram, asking the eligible if he is willing to accept so much *per diem* as a special laborer in a designated navy yard or station. The eligible is exceedingly likely to infer that the words mean what they say and that he who has passed the examination as a clerk, bookkeeper, or stenographer as the case may be, is to be employed as a laborer and that the tenure of his office, like his pay, is *per diem*. Correspondence in the files of the civil service will show that in many cases this misapprehension has brought about a declination.

It would seem to your committee that no time should be lost in altering both the designation and the basis of pay, or at least provision should be made for informing the eligible of the true nature of the place tendered him and the probable duration of his appointment if not the prospects of advancement in the service.

This element of the prospect of advancement in the service is one of great weight. Although the entrance salaries in the Treasury Department are no higher than those in other branches of the civil service, the salary average in the department proper in Washington is

higher than any other. That department is to be credited with many examples of clerks who have risen to a high place in its service, and there is doubtless a belief that its work fits a man for good paying positions in the business world. These impressions are doubtless reflected in the extremely low percentage of declinations of that department, which we have seen to be but 17.22%, against 49.65%, for instance, in the War Department, and 48.65% in the Navy.

Whether the whole scale of wages in the civil service should be raised is a question of such importance and depends upon so many considerations of a political, social, and economic character, that your committee hardly feels at liberty to express an opinion. But whether the general level of salaries should be raised or not there can be no doubt that the scheme of classification of salaries required a new adjustment.

It is but a truism to say that the same work rendered under the same circumstances should always receive the same compensation. But whether, under any system, this ideal state of things can be brought about may be doubted. He would be a bold man who would undertake to devise an accurately weighted scale for the infinitely various duties of the whole classified service. One thing at least, however, could be done and that is that the entrance grade to the departmental service on the one hand, or the field service on the other, should be uniform for all departments. A glance at Table No. 2, will show this is far from being the case at the present time. Starting with this initial grade your committee, if it were given a free hand to reconstruct the confessedly antiquated system of classification in the civil service, would also seek to arrange to advance from grade to grade, upon a basis which would bring more frequent promotions. Even if the present scale of salaries were retained and the classified service extended no higher than it extends to-day, this frequency of promotion could be accomplished by changing the number of classes of clerks from four to seven, with a difference in salary of $100 between

each class instead of $200 as at present. One of the obvious results of the greater number of grades would be the easy and more feasible adjustment of salary to the value and character of the work done.

The moral effect of promotion is by no means dependent upon a large salary-increment. A small increase which can be reasonably expected within a comparatively short time is far more stimulating than a large increase which seems to be indefinitely postponed. This suggestion has the value of being practicable without any real increase in the cost of the service.

Your committee, however, if they still had the imaginary free hand as to the reconstruction of the service, would extend the classified grades, properly so-called, beyond their present upward limit. The sense of "la carriere ouverte" which would be given by the existence of a few places of say, $3000 or $4000 at the end of the line, would be purchased very cheaply by the slight increase of cost necessary to provide for them. We believe that while such rewards for faithful and continuous service would be enjoyed by comparatively few, the chance of attaining them would be an incentive to many to make the civil service a permanent career. In the midst of our present era of prosperity, it is idle to hope that a great deal of the best material will not be drawn off by opportunities in the business world. It is nevertheless certain that publicly speaking that healthful tendency may be offset for administrative purposes in some measure, (and in our opinion it can only be offset) by a system of classification and promotion, which will take the deadness out of the service by offering to the imagination at least a parallel career.

Without some fundamental changes like these suggested, your committee can see no effective means of checking the increasing tendency to decline appointments in the civil service. Undoubtedly a season of hard times would, for a while, reverse the current, but that is a remedy which we neither can nor dare anticipate, and unless the times remained permanently hard the effect would after all be but temporary.

Aside from the fundamental reclassification and minor administrative and legislative changes already noted, we see nothing that is not inherent in the nature of the civil service and the fixed conditions governing appointments. In other words, we see no way in which the delays and difficulties and temptations incident to the present system of selection can be obviated, except by actually stimulating the willingness to accept. Take, for instance, the possible abuse of the temporary roll. Even in that happy time when the first person tendered a place in the civil service will immediately accept by wire, there will still be an interval of time between the request and appointment, and that interval must, in many cases, be filled by a temporary employee. We have thought of the possibility of doing away with the rule of apportionment in all places below a certain grade, or possibly only in the field service below a certain grade. We find, however, as a practical question, that to throw away the question of apportionment in the lower grades of service would mean that certain sections of the country would cease to be represented in that service at all. For reasons which it is beyond the scope of this paper to touch upon, the certification of the eligibles from an entire section of our country is practically confined to the lower grades.

Your committee cannot close without expressing its sense of indebtedness to the Secretary in the office of the Civil Service Commission, through whose courtesy they have obtained the information upon which this report is based, and by whose views and suggestions they have endeavored, as far as in them lay, to profit in this incursion into an unfamiliar field.

Respectfully submitted,

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CHARLES C. BINNEY,
CLINTON ROGERS WOODRUFF, Chairman.
Committee.

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